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AUTHOR	Scott, James
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ABSTRACT

Due to the number of children who are left unsupervised after school, schools are becoming involved in day care. A school may allow a day care center to function on its premises, form a partnership with another organization to run a day care center jointly, or run a day care program by itself. Although principals, teachers, or parents may instigate the involvement of schools in day care, the cooperation and support of all three groups is essential. Among the benefits of such a program are cost effectiveness and convenience. Legally, if the school provides only the facilities for day care, it is liable for the maintenance of those facilities. However, if the school is in charge of the entire operation, it is responsible for everything that happens on the premises. (RG)

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DAY CARE IN SCHOOLS

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DAY CARE IN SCHOOLS

In recent years, the number of working parents whose children attend public elementary schools has increased dramatically. Many of these children are left without supervision during the hours immediately after school lets out.

To alleviate this situation, some public schools have become directly or indirectly involved in day care, while others are considering the matter. School policy-makers who are looking at day care should be aware of its advantages and disadvantages before determining the extent to which they want the school to become involved.

Why are schools becoming interested in day care?

Over the last two decades, mothers of elementary school children have entered the work force in unprecedented numbers. Most of these women work outside the home, and many of them cannot afford private day care. Consequently, many of their children are left unsupervised during afterschool hours. Baden cites a statement by Senator Alan Cranston of California: "Census data tells us that at least two million school-age children between the ages of seven and thirteen are simply left alone without any supervision" after they are let out of school.

The primary reason schools are becoming interested in day care is to make available some form of supervision for those children.

How many public schools are involved in day care?

Accurate data are not available on the number of public schools involved in day care and the number of children that they serve. However, when the School-Age Child Care Project surveyed 171 day care centers, over half of them reported that they were connected in some way with public schools.

This connection takes many forms. Typically, the school permits a day care center to operate on its premises after school hours at little or no cost. The school might also provide support services, such as those of a school nurse or office staff. In some instances, the school and another organization (for example, a nonprofit corporation formed by concerned parents) enter a partnership to jointly run a day care center on the school's premises. And in some other cases, schools run day care programs without the involvement of any outside parties.

How does a public school become involved in day care?

Virtually any concerned citizen can start the ball rolling. In some instances, school principals have become disturbed by seeing large numbers of young children loitering on the school grounds unsupervised after hours and have decided to do something about it. In others, teachers have become concerned about the same problems. And in some cases, the impetus has come from the parents themselves.

No matter who initiates the process, it is essential to enlist the support of parents, teachers, and administrators. Without such support, school-connected day care doesn't have a chance.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of public school involvement in day care?

Proponents of public school involvement in day care point to the following advantages:

1. Cost effectiveness--day care centers that operate on school premises after school hours make use of existing facilities that would otherwise stand idle. Hence, these centers can charge parents lower fees than those charged by day care centers that must provide their own facilities.
2. Convenience--when day care is provided at the site where the child attends school, the parents do not need to take time from work to transport their children from school to a day care center.
3. Continuity--the child doesn't need to adapt to one environment for school and another environment for day care.
4. Community relations--by providing day care services, schools can strengthen their

bonds with the community. This is especially important in times of declining school enrollment and increasing school costs.

In addition, some districts have used day care centers in selected schools as magnets to promote desegregation. Other districts have taken advantage of school-connected day care centers as means of providing older students with "hands on" experience in the day care field.

Critics of school involvement in day care point out that teachers may come to resent having outsiders use "their" facilities. Critics also argue that day care provided by the schools or on school property becomes little more than an extension of the school day, instead of offering the child the homelike environment he or she needs after school.

What are the liabilities a school incurs when it becomes involved in day care?

The extent of a school's legal liabilities depends on the extent of the school's involvement. If the school's involvement is limited to providing the facilities for a day care center (for example, classrooms and playgrounds), then the school's responsibility is probably limited to making sure that those facilities are maintained properly. If the school actually runs the day care center, then, of course, the school is responsible for everything that happens there.

The legal manual by Cohen (see Resources) thoroughly discusses the many issues policy-makers and administrators must consider. These matters include liability, special consideration for handicapped children, the question of competition with private day care centers, staffing issues such as training and licensing, and rental and lease options if an outside group operates the center.

The manual's appendix includes a model school board policy, sample guidelines for allowing an independent group to operate a center, and a sample lease between the school and an outside group.

Whether the school operates the center or lets an outside group do so, the school should consult with legal counsel before becoming involved in a day care center's operation.

RESOURCES

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Prepared by James Scott
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College of Education, University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon 97403
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